

VISITOR SATISFACTION AND VISITOR UNDERSTANDING OF THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ACADIA NATIONAL PARK: 1999

Meeting the Requirements of the Government Performance and Results Act



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Abstract

In 1999, the National Park Service measured visitor satisfaction and visitor understanding of the significance of the park they were visiting through a brief visitor survey. Acadia National Park participated in this survey, which was intended to meet the requirements of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA).

In a brief report, the University of Idaho Cooperative Park Studies Unit presented the results of visitor evaluations of park facilities, services and recreation opportunities (GPRA goal IIa1) at Acadia. Ninety-nine percent of visitors were satisfied with the overall quality of visitor facilities, services, and recreation opportunities offered by Acadia, an amount well above the GPRA servicewide goal of 80% by 2002. Responses to questions about the quality of specific facilities or services showed there is room for limited improvement.

Visitor responses to the question about the significance of Acadia National Park (GPRA goal IIb1) were compared to significance statements identified in the park's GPRA plan. According to servicewide standards for evaluating answers to this question (visitor identification of at least one park significance item), 89% of Acadia visitors understand something about the significance of Acadia. This is again well above the servicewide standards of 60% by 2002. Three quarters of visitors knew Acadia was significant for its scenery and more than one-third knew it was significant for its recreation opportunities. Very few mentioned the park's cultural or natural resources, although there was some improvement over 1998.

When given the opportunity to make other comments, visitors mentioned the need for improvements to restrooms, trail signing and maps, enjoying the new Island Explorer bus service, and never tiring of Acadia after many park visits. A few wanted showers and more food services available in the park. Of the 89 people who made other comments, eight specifically mentioned crowding or congestion as a problem.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1999, the National Park Service (NPS) measured visitor satisfaction at Acadia National Park and visitor understanding of the significance of Acadia National Park through a brief survey card administered to a representative sample of visitors. Satisfaction and understanding of significance had been identified as two important servicewide goals established by the NPS to satisfy the requirements of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA).

In this report, data from the Visitor Survey Card Data Report (see attached Appendix) prepared by the University of Idaho Cooperative Park Studies Unit will be reviewed. The Idaho report presents the results of very general visitor evaluations of park facilities, services, and recreational opportunities. This report will also present and analyze the results for the open-ended part of the survey card that asks visitors to tell why Acadia is significant and to give any other comments they wish.

METHODS

Survey methods were established by the University of Idaho for all park units. At Acadia, four hundred survey cards were distributed on eight days between August 1 and August 31, at eight different locations (fifty cards for each). Distribution of cards was evenly divided between weekends and weekdays and two blocks of time, 8:00 a.m. to noon and 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. Locations, days, dates, and times are shown in Table 1.

Locations were selected for their high visitation, but there were several other considerations. Because of the division of the park and Mount Desert Island into an east and west side, we selected five locations on the more heavily visited east side and two on the less visited west side. The eighth location was made up of both Blackwoods Campground on the east side and Seawall Campground on the west side. Twenty-five survey cards were distributed in each campground.

Three locations on the east side were high use frontcountry sites. The other two locations were high use backcountry trail and carriage road sites. The carriage road intersection selected was between the high and low use areas on the carriage road system. The trail junction selected represents moderately difficult to difficult trails with high use. One of the high use frontcountry sites on the east side, Jordan Pond, was selected because of the concession there and the multitude of activities available (hiking, biking, and boating). On the west side, Echo Lake Beach was selected because it is a high use frontcountry area where the primary activity is visiting the beach and a secondary activity is hiking. Ship Harbor and Wonderland Trails were selected because they are easy trails and they represent the frontcountry users of the Rt. 102A corridor with its easily accessible park attractions.

Surveyors contacted visitors on a frequency of every third person or vehicle if more than 100 visitors were expected in the four hours, and every person or vehicle if less than 100 visitors were expected in the four hours (see Table 1).

Because of heavy visitor traffic at the Entrance Station, cards were handed out less frequently in order to be distributed evenly over the four hour time period. At the Visitor Center, it was estimated that every third visiting party received a card since the surveyor was frequently distracted by visitor questions. The carriage road site was visited twice due to time constraints, and the Ship Harbor and Wonderland areas were sampled twice due to inclement weather. Four Friends of Acadia ridgerunners and a park intern distributed the survey cards.

To see if the response rate could be increased from the 1998 level of 23%, after the respondents agreed to participate, surveyors offered them a postcard of the park.

Table 1: Location, Day, and Time for 1999 GPRA Card Distribution.

Location	Day	Time	Freq.
Entrance Station	8/07/99, Saturday	8:00 – 12:00	10th-15th
Echo Lake Beach parking lot	8/09/99, Monday	1:00 – 5:00	3rd
Beehive and Gorham Mountain Trail Junction	8/14/99, Saturday	1:00 – 5:00	every
Visitor Center	8/08/99, Sunday	8:00 – 12:00	3rd
Intersection 10 on the carriage roads	8/18/99, Wednesday 8/19/99, Thursday	1:00 – 5:00	3rd
Jordan Pond Area parking lots	8/10/99, Tuesday	1:00 – 5:00	3rd
Ship Harbor and Wonderland Trailheads	8/15/99, Sunday 8/21/99, Saturday	8:00 – 12:00	every
Seawall and Blackwoods Campgrounds	8/17/99, Tuesday	8:00 – 12:00	3rd

RESULTS

VISITOR SATISFACTION (GPRA GOAL IIA1)

The data presented in the Idaho report is mostly self-explanatory (see Appendix). The most important result was that 99% of visitors were satisfied overall with the quality of appropriate facilities, services, and recreation opportunities. This is well above the 1999 GPRA goal of 77.7% and the 2002 GPRA goal of 80%. The response rate was 35% (137 survey cards). This response rate is adequate, typical of those from the private sector, and up 12% from 1998. The data are accurate to plus or minus 6% with 95% confidence. This means that if different samples had been drawn, the results would have been similar (+/- 6%) 95 out of 100 times.

Visitor satisfaction with restroom facilities in the park had the lowest overall evaluation score (4.1) for the second year in a row. However, these evaluations are very general, and it is unclear whether visitors were evaluating the conditions of restrooms they used or the lack of restrooms in certain locations. In addition to restrooms, commercial services in the park and exhibits also scored in the low range on the evaluations, 4.2 and 4.3, respectively. These scores demonstrate that there is room for improvement in these areas, although they are still good evaluations.

SIGNIFICANCE OF ACADIA (GPRA GOAL IIB1)

One of the survey questions asked, “What is the special significance of this park?” Visitors could respond by writing in as many items as they wished. Their answers were categorized according to a series of four significance statements prepared from the park’s GPRA plan (National Park Service 1997). We revised these significance statements slightly based on visitor responses in the 1998 version of this report. These statements were followed fairly rigorously. Exact wording was not necessary, but the concept had to be readily apparent from the visitor’s choice of words. This was not always obvious or easy, but most statements clearly fell into one category. If a statement contained one or more ideas that were different, both were used in the analysis.

1. **Outstanding scenery** – glaciated coastal and island landscape – mountains meet the sea – highest topography along the East coast of North America – Somes Sound the only fjord in the continental U.S. – preservation from development, especially the coastline – geology (as relates to topography) – tides.

2. **Recreation Opportunities** – many activities available – carriage roads, trails, hiking, biking, boating – scenic motor roads – park accessible to all users – public shoreline access – peace/quiet/solitude.

3. **Rich cultural heritage** – Native American history – French and British settlement – history of park formation, large land donations, visible proponents of conservation – historic hiking trails – historic carriage roads.

4. **Biological/Ecological (Natural) resources** – any mention of flora or fauna – exceptionally high biological diversity – presence of numerous rare species – unique mix of plant species that are at their northern and southern range limits – abundant wetlands – variety of habitats and communities.

We counted the number of surveys with any response matching at least one of the four significance statements. Eighty-nine percent (112/126) of surveys with responses to this question had at least one match. Fourteen surveys had responses to the significance question but no match. Another fourteen surveys had no response to the question. Revisions to the significance statements based on 1998 data helped assure that visitor responses did not list something significant about the park that was not covered in the statements. The number and percentage of surveys with one, two, three, or four matches

are shown in Table 2. Results from 1998 are included for comparison. Revisions to the significance criteria for the 1999 survey probably caused the increase in percentages from 1998.

Table 2: Number of Matches to 1999 GPRA Significance Statements*

Number of Matches	Total Number of Responses	Percentage of Responses	1998 Results
At least one match	112 of 126	89%	82%
At least two matches	46 of 126	36%	21%
At least three matches	5 of 126	4.0%	1.2%
Four matches	1 of 126	<1%	0%

*The percentages in Table 2 do not add up to 100 because visitors could give multiple answers.

A look at which significance items visitors recognized is revealing but not surprising. Of the 126 responses to this question, almost three-quarters of the visitors recognized Acadia for its outstanding scenery. Recognition of the park's rich cultural heritage and natural resources scored much lower (Table 3), although there was some improvement over 1998.

Table 3: Number of Visitor Responses to 1999 Significance Areas

Significance Area	Number of Responses	Percentage of Responses	1998 Results
Scenery	93 of 126	73.8%	67%
Recreation Opportunities	50 of 126	39.7%	31%
Cultural Heritage	11 of 126	8.7%	2.5%
Natural Resources	10 of 126	7.9%	6.2%

*The percentages in Table 3 do not add up to 100 because visitors could give multiple answers.

Visitors offered many reasons why they felt Acadia was significant that did not match the four significance statements adequately. These "no match" comments are listed below:

1999 No Match Comments

The story of Mount Desert
Great dining
Forest near seashore
Carriage Roads are so interesting, and the Jordan Pond area is quite unique
Lobster

Its ability to purify one's mind and soul and make one realize there's more to the 9-5 schedule many of us keep
The human and natural history were very well presented
Very friendly and hopeful service – good attitude!
Better understanding of the dramatic results of the glaciers
Location (3 responses)
A well-organized, non-threatening wilderness
Close to the ocean and everything else
West trail to Cadillac Mountain is not well-marked
Man to the sea
A National Park that is situated on an island in the Gulf of Maine
A national treasure
You are placed directly in nature, not as an observer, but as a participant
“EVERYTHING”, Please keep up the best, you do the best! It is appreciated.
God's pocket
The Park, because of its location (proximity to the ocean) has stimuli for all five human senses
A good education on the forces of nature

SUMMARY OF OTHER COMMENTS

Visitors provided many comments in the final section of the survey card. We established seven categories of comments as described below and grouped comments in the appropriate categories. Under each heading, visitor comments are reported as written. A semi-colon separates the comments of each individual. We provide a summary for some categories.

Facilities and Maintenance

We wished the restrooms were bigger; Porta potties were pretty unpleasant at lakes; Need toilets at all trailheads where rangers and people meet for programs, e.g. Ship Harbor Nature Trail; Need different toilet paper holder - these shred paper – make bathroom floor a mess; Trail hikes need rating system (similar to Bryce Canyon N.P.) and description of hiking terrain; Park literature should say Mountain Biking; Lack of folders (self guide) at trail heads; Sometimes trail entrances could have been more clearly marked; The Pemetic Mountain hike was not well marked and difficult to follow at times. The rest were well marked; Sand Beach could definitely use more ladies restrooms; You need more ladder trails, the Precipice is great; Showers are needed in the park; Hope overhead and side branches could be trimmed more on roads and in campgrounds, difficult for RVs; We enjoyed hiking but found some trails not well marked (blue trail marker not visible); Wooden walkways on Eagle Lake Trail/Jordan Pond Carry were very slick when wet, you may want to roughen their surfaces for better traction; Wonderful but the trail maps could have been a little better; I am impressed with upgrade in carriage roads in recent years, a priceless resource which must not be lost; We wanted to purchase a written guide at Shipyard Harbor Nature Trail, but the box

was empty; Excellent signs to direct to sites of interest; I smoke and always carry my butts out, a butt bin at trailhead might encourage others; You should mark your trails better, or so people can see the marks, otherwise it was a great trip; Trailheads not marked by name on map; More parking; The carriage trails would be easier to navigate if signposts pointed to the next number as well; At some of the scenic areas restroom facilities were good but not enough to accommodate the summer crowds; The sign to the beginning of the loop road from 233 is very confusing; Upper Hadlock Pond parking lot not listed on map; Water tap not working at Hull's Cove V.C.; Signs fading – we walked S. on carriage trail below Bubble Pond and caught trail up. Also, the difficulty of this trail was not on the brochure your guide gave us. The trail wasn't listed;

There were 12 comments related to trail improvements and six related to improving restroom facilities.

Concessions

We always enjoy dining @ Jordan Pond; Jordan Pond House popovers were yummy;

Campgrounds

Great camping sites; Rangers were misleading on how to change campsites at Seawall; I am not pleased, you have raised the fee to match the private campgrounds; Electric available in campgrounds would be appreciated; Warm water/showers in campground would be an asset; We camped @ Blackwoods for 7 days, "showers would be nice in the park"; We were given site A15, but not told in advance that part of our scenery would include a steamshovel (site 14); Suggestion: better publicity for the times and topics of evening ranger programs in the campground; We never received a food box after having requested one; There was dog defecation at our campsite; Connect Blackwoods C.G. to some trails;

There were two comments requesting showers in the campgrounds.

Resource Management

Saw bald eagles 3-4 times in Aug; The volunteers are doing a good job restoring damaged (trampled) habitat; I bought a loon call and can communicate with them;

General Impressions

The Bar Harbor/Acadia area is a wonderful place to visit; Very "User-Friendly"; Lovely park; We will definitely come again, we left many trails unexplored; My family will be back, we had a wonderful week in y(our) park; It is our 8th visit and we still enjoy it and

are amazed by the beauty of it; it was very nice; We have been to many National Parks and greatly enjoy them; We have been here a number of times and will undoubtedly return again; Keep up the good work (3); Very good trip – lots of natural sites; National Parks are wonderful, they preserve nature for all to enjoy; This is our 3rd trip to Acadia – we love it; We have repeatedly come to Acadia because of the beauty and the biking; We were very satisfied; Our nine days were great; We loved it and plan to come back and visit; As Arnold Schwarzenegger would say, “I’ll be back”; Thanks for a great vacation; I camped for a week, biked, hiked and boated with a 6 yr. old; 4 people were involved in this survey. Thank you; Acadia is wonderful; My stay was too short; This place was strongly recommended to us by friends, it was very nice; Thank you; Acadia has a wonderfully quiet beauty; We were on a one way drive through today; Thank you very much, I hope my opinion counts. Everything NPS does is “the best”; Who needs Disney World when you have Acadia; We love this area so much, we come back every year. The park should purchase more land; We will try to work on “Washington” to help you;

Congestion/Crowding/Visitor Experience

Needs less accessible areas without children and big hair from New Jersey; Too much traffic on loop road; Couldn’t find enough less traveled or unpaved trails to hike; Efforts to reduce traffic problems seem to be improving – didn’t appear to be as crowded (w/ cars) as my last visit; The Rangers should be commended for enthusiasm; Rangers/staff helpful; Carriage roads for biking and Island Explorer Service was absolutely wonderful; Perhaps more beach; Dismayed by young children (under age 6) climbing Beehive, maybe sign like at Precipice would help; \$10 fee is definitely justified; Traffic detracts from ability to access and enjoy park; Propose limiting cars and increasing trams/buses even more; Great carriage trails for biking; Excellent bus shuttle; Bus service to park was great; Too much tourists at the Cadillac summit; Didn’t like intro film at visitor’s center – too pompous; More freshwater swimming; Too many cars and not enough hot showers; Had difficult location of the pond by audio after leaving the restaurant; (Need) LARGE, but appropriate signs requiring smokers to remove butts, and for those who piss in the woods to remove their Kleenex; I think more showers should be available, some directly in the park area; We went to a Ranger’s evening talk/slideshow, but the projector wasn’t working. As a teacher, I know that all equipment should be checked well in advance. The ranger did a good job doing an impromptu “oral presentation”; Concern for all the bikers on the narrow roads and the climbers up bee-hive – reading about it in Down East magazine; The Island Explorer bus project sponsored by the NPS and other organizations is wonderful; Would love to see bikers kept off the same roads as vehicles! Dangerous; Particularly enjoyed the view from atop Mt. Cadillac; Yes – I got engaged on top of Cadillac Mountain, it was beautiful scenery to match the beautiful event; The carriage roads and many varied hiking trails make this park one of the very best; I like your bike patrol; Thoughtful staff; the park map was not very helpful finding the “sites” in the park; Too crowded, disappointing weather; Loved the Great Head hike with ranger Margaret;

There were eight comments on crowding and congestion in the park and four comments on the Island Explorer shuttle bus system.

Services Needed

Addition of shuttle buses a plus – run them later (Esp. to Bar Harbor); Need for bike racks at Wonderland and Ships Harbor; Would like horseback riding available in park; Need more fast food or buffet style eating to feed the large number of families who visit the park; Park loop of the Shuttle would be nice instead of going to Bar Harbor;

There were two comments on how to improve the shuttle bus system.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The 1999 GPRA survey showed that Acadia National Park exceeded the national goals for satisfaction (IIa1) and significance (IIb1) by a large amount. For satisfaction, we are not likely to improve on the overall measure of 99% satisfaction without a great deal of effort for a small amount of gain. Instead we should focus on improving one or more specific facilities, services, or recreation opportunities.

As with “significance” in 1998, it is clear the park should focus on improving visitor understanding of our biological resources and rich cultural heritage. Visitors know Acadia is significant for its scenery and recreation opportunities. Inclusion of our mission statement in as many publications as possible and posting it prominently in public contact areas is one of many actions that may help with this.

REFERENCES

National Park Service

- 1997 Strategic management plans: Acadia National Park, St. Croix Island International Historic Site, Maine Acadian Culture Project. U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service. 72pp.